My stint at OSHE – Dr Joshua Wong

In the course of my preventive medicine residency training, I had the opportunity to work in OSHE as my second senior residency posting which began in Jan 2015. Prior to this, I had spent one year in the occupational medicine unit of a tertiary hospital. Coming from a clinical setting, I was keen to experience and learn how to manage occupational health issues in NUS, a world renowned university with a very vibrant research scene.

I started off reviewing the existing occupational health policies as well as the provision of occupational health services for staff and students. Under the guidance of my supervisor, Mr Saravanan, together with the inputs from my ‘seniors’ in the School of Public Health (SPH), we introduced a number of changes to policies pertaining to respirator use, statutory medical examinations, medical surveillance for work in BSL2/3 labs and others. We have also introduced new invoicing arrangement that would remove the financial burden on staff and therefore not hindering them to seek OH consultation whenever necessary. Much research, intense discussions and multiple revisions happened behind the scenes which were valuable learning experiences in themselves.

The other significant highlight of my stint was the Total Workplace Safety Health (TWSH) project being piloted in the Office of Facilities Management (OFM). I was involved in leading the preliminary discussions, advising OFM on what to expect, the requirements on their part as well as drafting the final report on our assessment findings. Apart from it being just a project for OFM, it was also a learning experience for both OSHE and SPH to review the whole process in order to replicate it in other departments who are interested to take up TWSH.

I had also shared my work experience in OSHE with my examiners when I sat for my residency exit examinations at the end of Dec 2015. I was elated to pass the examinations and it would not have been possible without the guidance and support from Mr Saravanan and his team.

The satisfaction at work comes from the interactions with my colleagues both within OSHE and beyond in making occupational health policies more user-friendly and helping them to see that managing workplace health is often easier than they think. The main obstacle I see in most places is behaviour and in order to change that, often it may involve incentivizing the staff to adopt healthier practices before it becomes a culture at the workplace. I believe when TWSH gains greater traction in NUS, it will receive greater commitment from the NUS community and transform NUS into a truly health promoting workplace for all.
My journey with OSHE – Dr Tessy Joseph

After completing my Ph.D. in 2000, I started searching for a research job in Singapore and aboard. Since I wanted to get more research experience, I accepted a position with the Department of Anesthesia, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, in the area of chronic pain research.

After several years of accumulating work experience in the biomedical research, I decided to pursue a more challenging career which could utilize my research and academic experience to further the NUS mission and vision. When I joined OSHE in 2008, I was struck by the professional, yet relaxed atmosphere of the office, and the friendly and approachable nature of its staff members. I was initially overwhelmed with all the knowledge that I was required to acquire in order to understand the various regulations. The excellent training and orientation received from the senior OSHE staff was very beneficial to me. I soon felt comfortable in my new job, thanks to the well-tailored training programmes and support from the senior management and team members within the department.

The most rewarding part of this job is the professional development opportunities in OSHE such as the various training programmes and the opportunities to lead new projects and acquire new skills. I also enjoy working with scientists from various disciplines. I look forward to coming to work every day as I firmly believe that I am making a difference in the lives of NUS staff and students by enhancing the safety in their workplaces and research thus reducing injuries and illness. We have a family like work environment in OSHE where we have regular social activities that helps us to bond together and work more effectively.
An exciting start with OSHE – Joel Swee

In August 2013, I made a career switch from a Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) officer in the Hazardous Materials department to a Safety & Health Manager in the Office of Safety, Health and Environment (OSHE). I joined OSHE with the desire to apply the knowledge gained from my experience with the SCDF and to also acquire expertise in the various aspects of workplace safety and health.

My key responsibilities are to manage the petroleum and flammable materials programme, assist in the chemical safety programme and conduct laboratory audits under the Laboratory Safety Management System within the university. I was also tasked to be the safety and health officer for the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. OSHE’s induction programme for new recruits and the spirit of camaraderie among colleagues ensured that I adjusted to my new work environment and challenging duties quickly.

In the short time I had spent at OSHE, I have participated in many and different trainings and development opportunities to further advance my expertise in various fields of safety and health. I have also embarked on my post-graduate studies in the Masters of Science (Safety, Health and Environmental Technology) in the same month I joined OSHE. I am confident that OSHE is a place to build a fulfilling and rewarding career where the journey for growth and development – professional and personal will not cease. Come join the OSHE family!
21 January 2011

I’m fortunate to have had the opportunity to work as a Senior Safety & Health Manager within the Office of Safety, Health, & Environment (OSHE) at the National University of Singapore. For this I owe my utmost gratitude to Mr. Saravanan Gunaratnam and Dr. Peck Thian Guan who made the contract position with OSHE possible.

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I started a two-year contract with OSHE in February 2009. My job responsibilities included managing the safety programmes within the Safety & Health Division (Microbiology and Biomedical Group) and establishing and improving the animal biosafety programme to help prepare the institution for AAALAC accreditation.

Upon initiation of my work contract I was able to bring my previous knowledge and experiences to NUS, but importantly I needed to understand the local culture, context and considerations as well as learn the applicable Singapore safety and health legislations. Fortunately, my colleagues quickly took me under their wing to provide the necessary guidance and support during my induction period in order to ensure this understanding. Easing into the local culture has been the easy part, but like all of the rules and regulations in Singapore, there are lots of them and they are often complex and complicated. Rest assured that OSHE’s well organized safety & health legal register for NUS is a good place to start!

I learned that in the short amount of time since the inception of OSHE in August 2002, the department has grown rapidly to keep pace with the influx of research funding and new buildings and laboratories on campus. Commendably, OSHE leadership has strived to hire qualified and high quality staff to fulfill the safety and health needs of the university. Without question the most rewarding part of this job has been the people with whom we work. It has been an invaluable experience for me to learn from my OSHE colleagues as well as the other staff and faculty we serve throughout NUS.

One of my significant projects was to determine ways to help harmonize the efforts of OSHE, Comparative Medicine, and the IACUC Office to achieve a more sound safety and health management programme for the animal care and use activities at NUS. Despite some challenges along the way, we made significant progress and the recent awarding of the AAALAC accreditation is a symbol of the achievements made and the collective hard work of the departments and the people involved. Through these team efforts, it was particularly rewarding for the AAALAC site visit team to comment that our safety & health programmes were regarded as “excellent”.

The safety management systems (laboratory certification scheme) and safety promotion schemes administered by OSHE are both innovative and effective. Although a lot of hard work is required to manage these programmes, and they do come with their own occasional challenges, there is no
question that they promote and maintain a positive safety culture in our laboratories and campus facilities. It is truly impressive to see how well supported these OSHE programmes have become from the university’s upper management, and participation from the various departments on campus is quite good. I’ve learned a lot from this approach towards safety management and it has been an honor to help with these various efforts. I look forward to extracting elements from this system to implement and improve safety management in my next place of employment.

There are many other noteworthy OSHE programmes in place, perhaps too numerous to list here, and certainly areas for continued improvement to occur. OSHE has matured rapidly in the past few years and will have to work hard to keep pace with the continued growth of the university. I’m confident this will be achieved due to the personnel within OSHE and the leadership in place.

Two years has quickly passed by and my contract has come to an end. Unfortunately, for personal family related reasons I will return home to the USA. Singapore will be greatly missed, but my time here will remain a fond memory.

In summary, my experience at NUS has been extremely rewarding and I’m certain that anyone who decides to work with the OSHE team will find a similar experience. I look forward to staying in touch with my NUS friends. Feel free to contact me at patloscott@gmail.com if you have any questions or would like discuss working at OSHE further.
From intern to full-time:
My journey with OSHE

By Dulani Upeksha Gamlaksha
(Worked as an Assistant Safety & Health Manager at the Office of Safety, Health and Environment, National University of Singapore, from 2010 – 2013)

In early 2008, just after I started my Masters in Safety, Health and Environmental Technology, at the National University of Singapore (NUS), I met Dr. Peck Thian Guan, the Director, and Mr. Saravanan s/o Gunaratnam, the Head of Safety & Health Management Division, of the Office of Safety, Health and Environment (OSHE) at NUS. This was because Dr Peck and Mr Saravanan happened to be the course instructors for one of the modules I took under my course. Through them, I got to know that there is an intern position available at OSHE for a postgraduate student with a biological background and was very fortunate to have been considered as appropriate to fill that intern position. From early 2008 until I finished my course in mid 2009, I worked part-time at OSHE where I was mainly involved in expanding and maintaining a database of regulated biological work carried out and regulated biological material used at NUS.

This undertaking provided me with a great opportunity to get myself well familiarized with the national regulations and guidelines, as well as NUS requirements, applicable to carrying out life science research in Singapore and NUS. In addition, this intern position also gave me a chance to observe first-hand, the role played by a safety office in a university environment and the different programs carried out by OSHE in achieving safety and health compliance at NUS.

In late 2010, I got an opportunity to join OSHE, full-time, as safety officer where I got drafted into the Microbiological & Biomedical group. On joining, one of my key duties was to function as the main liaison with regulatory agencies, such as the Regulatory Policy Branch of the Ministry of Health and the Genetic Modification Advisory Committee, to ensure legal compliance for biological work carried out at NUS. Some of the other responsibilities entrusted to me included, carrying out secretarial duties for Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC) of NUS (as OSHE is the secretariat for IBC), carrying out audits under the NUS Laboratory Safety Management System and reviewing project risk assessments submitted by principal investigators carrying out research in life sciences. Starting from early 2012, I got more involved in the animal research safety program of OSHE where I was a member of a core group that liaised with the institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) and Comparative Medicine (CM) in ensuring safety in animal research.

Although the posting with OSHE was my first full-time safety and health related position, the structured induction program available to new recruits and the support rendered by the senior colleagues were invaluable in understanding and quickly adapting to the roles assigned to me. In addition, the knowledge I gained during my internship regarding
regulations and guidelines was extremely useful, in getting orientated to the role I played as the liaison with regulatory agencies.

In addition to helping NUS researchers to ensure legal compliance, OSHE plays an important role in the instances where dialogue happens between the research community of NUS with legislative agencies. For example, in 2011, the Genetic Modification Advisory Committee requested for suggestions and feedback from the public to revise the ‘Singapore Biosafety Guidelines for Research on GMOs’. Many of the suggestions provided by the NUS community through OSHE were accepted in revising these guidelines. In addition, through discussion with regulatory agencies, OSHE plays an instrumental role in making legislative requirements more harmonized and more simplified to comply for the benefit of the NUS research community.

OSHE has implemented a number of programs and initiatives targeted at enhancing safety and health at NUS. One good example is the animal research safety program, a key feature of which is the close co-ordination between OSHE, IACUC and CM. This co-ordination, achieved mainly through regular meetings of the three offices and walk-throughs of animal research facilities, has been established to ensure accurate identification of risks and control measures, and to effectively communicate this information to all related parties in the three offices, to achieve safety and health compliance for animal research projects carried out at NUS.

The laboratory safety management system under which almost all research labs at NUS are currently certified, is another important program administered by OSHE. Under this program, OSHE provides the tools and expertise in establishing a safety management system at the lab level and look for the effectiveness of establishment of the system through an initial audit. Continuous maintenance of the system is checked for, through subsequent periodic audits. This system has helped to disseminate safety and health related information to all sectors of the NUS community and has encouraged greater participation of personnel of all levels in ensuring safety and health compliance.

The above are just two of the numerous safety and health programs implemented at NUS. In addition, OSHE is constantly looking to improve on the existing systems and to implement new initiatives to address emerging safety and health concerns, as NUS venture into more and more new research areas.

Looking back at the last three years, I can honestly say that I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a safety officer with OSHE. Although there were challenging situations at times, my journey with OSHE was exceedingly fulfilling and rewarding. Senior management and group leaders were extremely supportive and were always available to provide guidance, feedback and suggestions for improvement during the course of my work. In addition they actively encouraged and made possible many training and development opportunities which helped to further my knowledge in various fields of safety.

Everyone who joins OSHE are introduced to its core values of nurturing, team work, accountability and service and are actively encouraged to live by them. During my three years at OSHE I not only experienced those values been practiced on a daily basis but also saw on numerous occasions, people going the extra mile in achieving the very best of those values. In my opinion the greatest feature of OSHE is the tremendous amount of support and teamwork that is available within and among the different groups and divisions. The work environment is such that most of the colleagues who work with each other will become good friends over the years.
Although my OSHE experience has been nothing but satisfying, I had to bid goodbye to OSHE and its wonderful people due to the decision to leave Singapore for personal reasons. But the enriching experiences I gained over the years will be fondly remembered while I shall keep in touch with all the great friends I made at OSHE. In conclusion I can say that OSHE has been a truly gratifying workplace for me. If anyone wishes to find out more details about OSHE and working at OSHE I’ll be more than willing to share my experiences. I can be contacted at dulani7@yahoo.com.